

While we are currently without a permanent Rector, we have been blessed this year with a sermon each week from Rev. Jim Horton, a friend of St. Thomas who sometimes leads services when we are able to meet in person. This was his 2020 Christmas Eve Message.

### Christmas Eve

Some time ago I came across the following prayer. “ Now may God, who brightened the night skies over Bethlehem, and filled shepherd’s hearts with mysteries, and transformed a stable into a thing of immortal beauty, brighten our skies, fill our hearts with mystery and transform our lives forever. Amen”

This evening we again recited the ancient story of the coming of the Christ child. St. Luke tells us of a child being placed in a stable manger, of common laborers watching their sheep and being mystified by something that showed bright around them and another gospel writer reminds us of a bright star observed over Bethlehem. That night, so long ago, was filled with mystery and populated with persons who would be transformed forever. A carpenter who may have never understood what was going on in Mary, his wife’s pre-natal journey; a mother whose agony in child-birth was simply a foreshadowing of an even greater agony some thirty years later. Shepherds, who for a very few brief moments had reached the mountain-top experience of their lives and a child, protected from the cold by clothing scraps that his mother wrapped around him, engaged a world and a population that would both honor and praise him as “Wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace, Lord and Savior” and scream at him and utter those haunting words, “Crucify him, crucify him.” They were all there; mystery surrounded them.

We come here this evening to remember and relive that event and like that first evening so long ago, this evening we too are surrounded by mystery. How will God, through the gift of God’s son to us this night, move and transform our lives? Will our skies be brightened? Will we, through the awesome visit of the Christ child, see life more clearly? Will we see more clearly that our loved ones are special, gracious gifts to us that need to be fondled and embraced with warmth and affection? Will we see more clearly that no matter how high a mountain we ascend or how low a valley we fall into, the Christ child is there, savoring our accomplishments,

caressing and sustaining us when we fall. Will we see more clearly that every person, every person we encounter is a cherished beloved child of God. May all our skies be brightened.

May our hearts be filled with mystery. The Baptismal service in our Prayer Book provides an appropriate definition of mystery in this context in which we beseech God to give the newly baptized “the gift of joy and wonder in all God’s works.” We, Christ followers, are called to be immersed in life, enchanted by the natural beauty and cycle of creation, awed by the creative beauty of artisans, and musicians and vocalists, as we were earlier this evening during the prelude music, enthralled by first words and first steps of children dear to us; amused by humorous moments and grieved by moments of sadness and destruction. The incarnation of Jesus, the coming of the Son of god into this existence, is the model of fulfilling life; to live fully one must engage life completely; savoring it, fondling it. And one final aspect of being filled with mystery is the glorious freedom to say, whether we are talking about life or personal relationships or our relationship with god. That there are many things I seemingly cannot know nor understand and accept that as part of the joy and wonder in all God’s works.

The final words from the prayer I recited earlier are “transform our lives forever.” I firmly believe that with the coming of the Christ child our lives have already been transformed forever. At that first visit in Bethlehem, Joseph’s life was changed, Mary’s was changed, the shepherd’s lives were changed forever because they came face to face with the Divine. It is the same with us but in fact our encounter with the divine is not a one-time stable event. Every moment of our lives is an incarnational event because every moment we stand in the presence of Jesus. It is a transforming event; it is the opportunity to change, to allow God to brighten our skies and to fill us with mystery. We have a God who loves us dearly and intimately; who yearns to savor our joys and salve our sorrows; who delights in our moments of accomplishment and grieves in our days of depression. I am convinced that the most significant aspect of the coming of the Christ child is God’s eternal statement to us that we are God’s beloved and that statement of love informs us that nothing, absolutely nothing shall separate us from that love.

Amen